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Going Far Means Returning

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by

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Report

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Abstract

Going Far Means Returning

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Everything is a stretch to me. All existing things, notions, places are a few steps away from morphing into one another as we slide through time. Mutability is embedded in our world as a razor-sharp premonition. I am driven by the transformative qualities of my surroundings and the circular properties of materials, focusing on the surface as a physical, but also a philosophical space.

While my process is linked to scientific discoveries and empirical premises, I choose figures that become motifs for poetic emancipation. These shapes attain autonomy, creating whimsy and opening multiple entry points in the work.

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NOSE STORY

Imagine being a nose. That's what you are and how you identify.

You are symmetrical, a protuberance located at the center of a surface, composed of cartilage and skin. Two holes are the most distinctive aspect of your nature and are called nostrils. In fact, those two holes are stretched and elongated tunnels. Their profile is carved into your core to create two long, warm passageways leading to a respiratory system that supplies a larger entity.

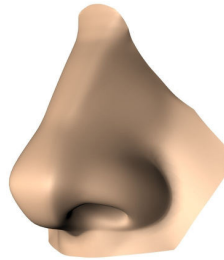


Illustration 1: Nose

You will never fully understand these two turbid caves and the secret lands to which they lead. You pull air in, you push it out. Your life is repetition, a constant cycle ruled by the inflation and deflation of this far away enigma. You pump air in for something deeper than yourself, you exhale it because it has to leave; it is pressed out of you. The air passes through you, only to return and exit, slightly changed.

You are a channel. A tube. A conduit. An empty vessel witnessing a constant stream of non-tangible, floating matter. You swallow up the atmosphere around you, only to send it along to another entity to which you serve, and are a part. You are a vacuum, full of questions and you take it all in.

It seems important.

You are a canal. A track. An outlet, equipped with an army of receptors that detect through the air, a wide variation of fragrances that you find highly descriptive and gratifying. These fragrances give you a crisp sense of reality and belonging. It is a 3.5-inch-long group of specialized tissues, located in the upper region of your nasal cavity that is responsible for your recognition of smells. Your olfactory system is what keeps you curious and aware. It is what brings you to life, and what allows you to understand the world around you.

Smell is a powerful force. It enters you, attaching itself to the air you breathe. This air that moves odors is shapeless and without volume, a mixture of gas and dust particles. Smell is like a Trojan horse, impossible to detect before it has already made its way in. It is like swallowing your environment. And it stays in you, and leaves as abruptly as it comes, leaving you like a ghost. Later on, you recognize these smells when they return. Revisit them. The experience of memory through scent is close to time traveling. It brings you precisely where you were, leaving a trace.

You also have sensors giving you a hint of your surroundings. Your outer layer is made of skin, a protecting and regulating organ affording sensation. It gives volume to your grasp of the world, smell and touch. You feel things. The temperature can make you cold and runny, even stuffy. Or it can make you sweaty, slowing down your breath. At times, air can feel warm, even hot, brushing your tunnel cavities like soft flames. You can feel scratches, tickles, pressure and squeezes.

But this incredible elixir of volatilized chemical compounds that continually comes true keeps surprising you. Smell is truly your most acute and enchanting ability. You stay still, patiently browsing the atmosphere, building a symphony of aromas that portray the world. This is how you perceive reality. Life is a smell stream, a stream of fluctuating

fragrances sometimes following a narrative or timeline. And this pumping force resonates from deeply from within and even beyond ... But really, to you, life is about smell. Right?

The purpose of everything is to have a scent, a character, an olfactory value. And you, the symmetrical center of this surface, are there to perceive it. What more can there be?

What more can there be?

You only know one truth in this world, and that is your function. You must pull air in and push it out in an eternal back and forth. This is what allows you to continue this intoxicating activity of world discovery through smell. With smell, air comes in. One cannot be without the other. It has been like this since the first smell you can remember. This pressure, this inner force that summons you to channel air through your tunnels is absolute. You only know to obey it. There is no alternative. A certainty emerges from the deepest part of your being. You glimpse an inexplicable and terrifying truth, that the world will terminate after your last breath.



Figure 1: *Face It Wyatt*, photograph, 12 x 18 inches, 2018

YOU ARE A TUNNEL

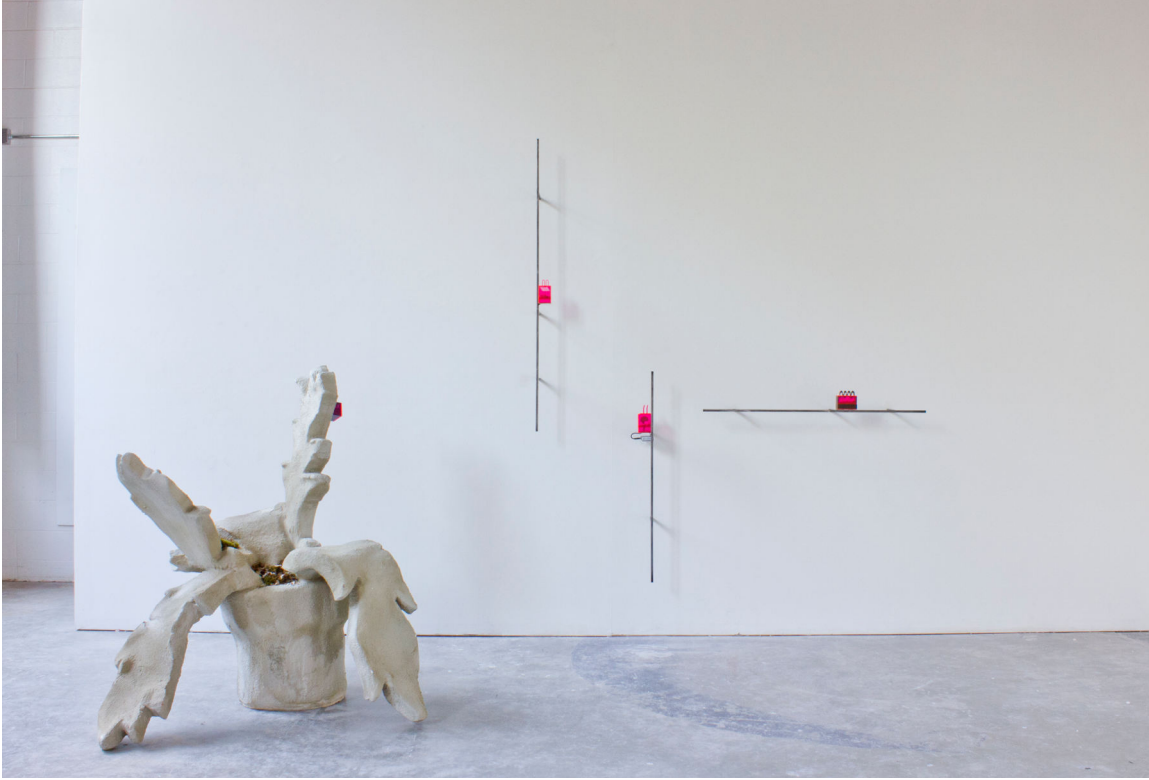


Figure 2: *Material Loophole*, foam, sprayed cement, laser-cut acrylic, mealworms, steel, spy camera, power bank, 2018

Body

You walk into a slick, bright white space; you see an oversized houseplant, seemingly made of Styrofoam. A small pink acrylic box is being monitored not so far away. The boxes are filled with some kind of pest. Mealworms. They seem busy, tunnelling their way into crumbs of Styrofoam. Maybe it is from the large plant? You look back and see that a small bite is missing from one of the plant's giants leaves. Ok, the bugs are eating the plant. And they're being monitored too.

No, the focus is not on the bugs. This is about you, the viewer. You are being monitored in this large white box.



Figure 3: Screenshots from the mealworm farm, 2018

I want to get closer to a body. My body, probably. To touch your body, most certainly. To feel empathy? Maybe. And all this leads to the vision of “a body” as a shared, flexible, and mutable concept. Through this vision and with this essay, I am trying to get closer to this conceptual body, intimate even, in the most universal sense.

A World of Category

Everything is a stretch to me. All existing things, notions, places are a few steps away from morphing into one another as we slide through time. Mutability is embedded in our world as a razor-sharp premonition. I am sourcing many ideas from the realm of the scientific, using empirical methodologies to emulate systems of observation and discovery. Rational thinking is a way of compartmentalizing the world so as to better assimilate it. Reading these lines engages you in this rational, human way of absorbing the world. Still, I talk about a dad sitting on a hat made of hydrogen rubber force, dragging an encapsulated donut across a shopping mall for miniature tornados lying about foreign linguistics. Your brain is trained to follow some sort of logic, even when reading autocorrected butt-dial gibberish inserted in a thesis report essay.



Illustration 2: Cage

Captivity

Language is an obvious example of how we classify concepts and meanings in order to elaborate upon complex ideas. We squeeze, collapse and crumble things in order to name them. Roland Barthes speaks about the fascism of language, softly closing the ideological gates of freedom in front of us. “Language is legislation, speech is code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and all classifications are oppressive.”¹

¹ Barthes, Roland. “Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France”, in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Maria Painwater, New York, Routledge, 1996, 365-366.

With language comes the subtleties of self-awareness, the world stretches with meaning, but also becomes clogged with it. With an expansive understanding of life comes the perception of its limitations. One might quickly become alienated from one's environment and existence. Lucidity, shaped as a starving creature, feeds on our perception of the world. What does it all mean; why am I here; who am I? A silky film is introduced between the present and us. A soft and hermetic veil called language crawls into our souls, imposing questions as loud voids.

French philosopher, Catherine Malabou, links this premise to the fact that most important philosophical questions about life always include a reflection on prison. With living free, comes, by opposition, the idea of living in captivity. "Captivity produces the fantasy of an outside: an authentic life outside. Outside walls, we might add outside concepts, and outside language."²



Figure 4:

Mealworm farm,
laser-cut acrylic,
screen, silicone,
Styrofoam crumbs,
mealworms,
mealworms castings.,
2018

² Malabou, Catherine. *Life and Prison*, Alienocene, 2018

Breathing

Nose Story, the short story prefacing this essay, is a fiction about a nose living its life in the middle of a face. It is a visualization exercise, introducing the idea of our compartmentalization of the world. Occurring in the second person, the story describes an experience of reality – your experience of reality – through empirical contact. The nose is a perfect junction between the inside and the outside. It reconciles them through its two gateways, through which it breaths air.



Figure 5: *Janus Genius*, two-headed fountain installed in the pond of the UMLAUF Sculpture Garden & Museum. The Janus head is a mythological figure facing both the future and the past. It calls for a place of reflection, beginning and ending. Styrofoam, sprayed cement, PVC pipe, water pump., 2018

You

You, as a viewer – a reader, a human equipped with intellect – have agency in this world and in the work I do. I cherish you. I include you directly, but you have been included since the beginning, before anything was even written or fabricated. We are walking hand in hand here. You and me. Things are designed for you, not just by me, but also by everyone else. And you choose to look at them, to think about them. You make things exist. Through the story, I asked you a simple, yet fundamental existential question: *What is your real nature and why do you exist?*

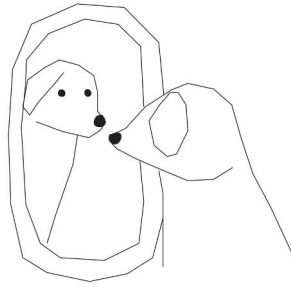


Illustration 3: Dog

I want you to find yourself, just as much as I want to find myself. Maybe if we dig deep enough, we will find each other.

David DeGrazia³, the moral philosopher specializing in animal ethics, differentiates three types of self-awareness in animals: *Bodily self-awareness*: they are different than their environment; it prevents them from eating themselves. *Social self-awareness*: they have a role within their group that will enable interactions with one another, allowing them to survive. *Introspective awareness*: they understand feelings, desires and beliefs.

³ DeGrazia, David. *Taking Animals Seriously: Mental Life and Moral Status*, Cambridge University Press, 1996

Oroboros

Maybe if you stare long enough, you will end up seeing yourself.



Illustration 4: Snake

Storyteller

The impulse to leave traces of presence on the wall is not a novel act. Generating white, hermetic and pristine cubic spaces has become a norm that has been both accepted and challenged in the past century and theorized upon by Brian O'Doherty⁴. Yet it is much older than that.



Illustration 5: Skull

We are now fully aware of the transformative impact of such an act. The otherwise trivial move of placing a thing on the wall – or on the floor of a white room – is a decisive and powerful action that confers on the chosen object a sacred aura that we revere. We collectively accept the convention; we are in front of an artwork. The mind behind the object is the one of an artist, channelling creative power through the material world.

⁴ O'Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. University of California Press, 2000

Time Traveller

The oldest examples of this type of subjective act of interference with the world were brought to us by the time traveling power of geological formations. Stones, boulders, caves are peaceful witnesses of time obscured from our vision. Drawings, etchings, and stencils left on stone walls, petroglyphs, were all made using the hand as a tool and the world as a material. An inquisitive and conquering limb could gain control over its environment, finally leaving a mark and a vision, decisively and significantly.

A moment of singularity in our ontology.

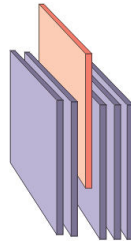


Illustration 6: Layer

Topological Nature of the Wall

The wall is a surface. A slick flat plane embodying structure. A blade slicing space, dictating meaning, orienting flow. It is a barrier, a division, a defining boundary between the inside and the outside. The wall is a screen, offering a sea of opportunities, a land of potential. It is empty and ready to impose. And I am on a hunt for the expansive meaning of the term “surface,” an understanding that suggests absorbing philosophical ramifications. The abstract notion of the surface is a blurry one. There is no way to determine how thick its layer should be. We can zoom down to the molecular scale, then to the atomic scale and so on; we conclude that a seemingly unified surface can be broken down into myriad tiny pieces of floating matter.



Figure 6: *Slippery Clump (Traces)*,
26 feet long wall with plaster embeddings installed at the UMLAUF Sculpture Garden &
Museum in Austin., 2018

I gained interest in the mathematical field of topology through understanding surface as a fluid entity. In topology, popularly named “rubber sheet geometry”, the world is viewed as a soft and malleable material. While in geometry the angles, degrees, and measurements are collected to analyse a form, in topology we compare points and properties of an object in terms of their positioning toward one another. Two forms are considered topologically identical when they can be flexed into each other without being torn apart, stitched, or glued.

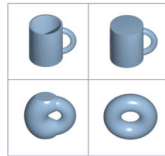


Illustration 7: Donut / Mug

Hole

I started quantifying my environment in terms of aperture. The hole quickly became a mythological monster, offering new challenges. The hole is a way for something to enter something else, a vehicle to introduce negative space, positive objects or planar ideas.



Figure 7:
*Seeing Through the
Donut Hole, 2018*



Figure 8: *Knuckle*, foam, epoxy putty, bondo, 2018

Face It

Through this gap, the viewer enters the wall, as it enters space. You are the viewer, and you live in this larger arena that is the world. You contaminate everything, making connections and associations. The world is a blend of clustered things that we consider different from one another, branches and families, genera and species, types and identities, geographies, temporalities... all categories depriving one another from being each other.



Figure 9:
Tunneling Cheetos, Site specific
piece installed in the Vaulted space of
the Visual Art Center. Cheetos,
Drywall, pvc pipe, 2019

The Wall is a Vacuum

In the gallery space, the wall welcomes it all with open arms. Like a vacuum. There is a small tunnel in the wall, allowing a Cheeto to subtly crawl around the corner. The wall is a hole. The world can come in and out of it, like a slow breath. Leaving traces of its presence, imprints, smells, and echoes.

Going Far Means Returning

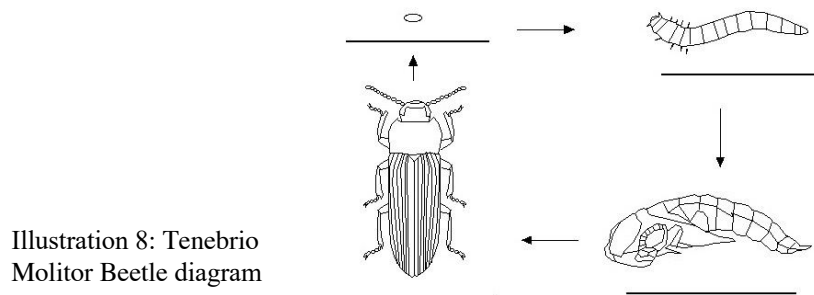
Materials have life cycles of their own; I am thinking about their circular properties and their relationship to time. I like to think of how they come to exist in the world and how they exit in it. Styrofoam, for example, exists in a paradox of time. On the one hand, it is used for short-term consumption as shipping and packaging material, its structure too brittle for longer tasks. It is most likely to become trashed immediately upon reception. On the other, it stretches time beyond the human scale. The time frame during which this synthetic material decays is close to a million years. Its chemical composition is virtually impossible to break down and includes myriad health and environmental complications. But it seems that nature has found a loophole in our problem.



Figure 10:
Studio conducted experiment.
Styrofoam was fed to
mealworms for a period of 100
days. The worms were able to
eat, digest and decompose the
material.

Alchemic Heroes

Recent scientific discovery shows that mealworms, the larvae stage of the *Tenebrio molitor* Beetle, can eat, digest and decompose polystyrene. They can break down its chemical structure, transforming it into organic material, compost, a healthy plant fertilizer that can be fed back into the Earth's circling metabolism.



The worm can accomplish this prodigious task only during the larval stage of its existence. The larvae gut can degrade foam, but as soon as the insect morphs into beetle (3-4 months), it becomes indigestible. I find that this very specific time frame, when juxtaposed with the natural life span of Styrofoam, is a raw display of nature's sense of irony.

My Studio as a Lab

I first cultivated the worms in a Home Depot bucket that I rigged as a "farm". I cut open a large window on the bucket's side, to which I glued a screen that allowed me to observe the worms while keeping them safe. I pierced both ends, lid and base, and inserted a metal rod to hold everything on axis, allowing the bucket to rotate.



Figure 11:
First prototype, Home Depot bucket,
screen, steel, wood, screws, foam,
mealworms, 2018

I was looking for a way to separate the castings from the worms without having to take the worms out of the farm each time. I found this system deep down a YouTube rabbit hole on a channel that showcased a handy middle-aged man who walked me through his process of building a spinning farm. With centrifugal force generated from spinning the bucket around its axis, he collected the castings that flew out the bucket.

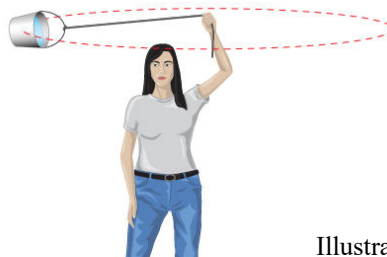


Illustration 9: Centrifugal Force

This caveman method gave me nightmares. After spinning the farm only once, the terrifying image of a spinning world overwhelmed my mind. I imagined gravity taken away from us – me, you, the worms – causing us all to fly away from Earth. I felt horrible and needed another solution.

After many drawings and small tests, I came up with a new design: an acrylic box with two compartments. The upper compartment serves as the worms' living quarters. I created multiple vents around the lateral walls to allow airflow, and I fed them Styrofoam through the lid opening above. The lower compartment is for the collecting of castings. A screen located directly beneath the worms allows the compost to pass through, a simple use of gravity.

This solution is simple and elegant.



Figure 12:
First successful farm design, pink acrylic sheet, mealworms, screen, silicone, foam, castings, 2018

The Cheetos Puff Experiment

I was drawn to Cheetos in the same organic way I gained interest in Styrofoam. They share a material crunchiness and highly processed features that allow meaningful tactile relationships. On a late studio night evening, I was enjoying drinks and chips with a studio mate and got excited about the alchemical properties of my mealworms. A celebratory impulse brought me to feed them Cheetos. I left the Cheetos in their farm for about a week and the results were astounding.



Figure 13: *Nervous Cheetos*, Cheetos Puff, Glue, 2019

They refused to touch it.

Cheetos can be eaten by humans, yet mealworms won't touch them. Styrofoam can be eaten by mealworms but no one else can digest it.

While my process is linked to scientific discoveries and empirical premises, I like to choose figures that will become motifs for a poetic emancipation. In my recent exhibition *The Mathematical Properties of a Donut*, I used the shapes of the donut and the rainbow to talk

about the topological nature of space and objects. These shapes gained their autonomy, creating a whimsical feel and opening up multiple entry points. It is in the same way that I choose to work with Cheetos and mealworms. Their identities become one and the same, tunneling and snaking up and down the space. They exchange references to negative space, alluding to digestion and referring to one another's plastic qualities.



Figure 14:
Studio test in preparation for the site-specific installation in the Vaulted Space of the Visual Art Centre, 2019



Figure 15: *VAC Install*, Cheetos Puff, Glue, steel, mealworm farms, sulfur, pewter, Styrofoam, gypsum prints, 2019

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